

How did imperial Rome stay so big?

Greg Woolf

Visitors to imperial Rome were amazed at what they saw. But how did the city become so big? And how did it retain its size? Greg Woolf puts some of the theories to the test and concludes by offering his own verdict.

The wonders of ancient Rome

Strabo, a Greek geographer who visited in the reign of Tiberius, describes how the Romans of recent times had filled the city with beautiful monuments. Pompey, Caesar, Augustus and his friends and relatives had outdone previous generations. Strabo was especially impressed by the Field of Mars with all its colonnades and race-tracks, its art collections and parkland, its three theatres, its temples and its amphitheatre, and the Mausoleum of Augustus.

And again, if, on passing to the old Forum, you saw one forum after another ranged along the old one, and basilicas, and temples, and saw also the Capitol and the works of art there and those of the Palatine and the Porticus of Livia, you would easily forget everything else outside the city. Such is Rome. (Strabo, Geography 5.3.8)

Imperial Rome did not lose its charms. Tacitus described barbarian envoys gobsmacked at the scale of imperial monuments, and they still impressed visitors in the fourth century when Ammianus describes an imperial visitation. Every account we have highlights man-made marvels, the Theatre of Pompey, the Colosseum, the Circus Maximus, and the ‘golden temples’ that filled the city.

The big city

Modern historians marvel for a different reason. The population of the City was by ancient standards enormous. It is not easy to estimate ancient population sizes, but we know a lot about Rome. We know its physical size, and something of the density of its tower blocks (*insulae*) and aristocratic houses. We have a great marble plan of the city created in the early third century A.D., now in fragments but being painstakingly reassembled like a

giant jigsaw by a computer in Silicon Valley. There is a catalogue of buildings compiled in the fourth century, so we can count baths, temples, and houses. We can calculate the volume of water brought by the aqueducts, and we know how many of the population received first grain, then meat and wine too from the emperors. Put all these figures together and the total population must be between 800,000 and one million in the reign of Augustus.

We can be pretty confident Rome was the biggest city on the planet in that period. It was definitely bigger than any other Mediterranean city. Recent surveys suggest there were between 1000 and 2000 cities in the ancient world, but three quarters of them probably had populations of no more than a few thousand. Romans already knew Rome was different. In the first of Virgil’s *Eclogues* one shepherd tells another how he used to think that Rome was just like their local market town.

*The City they call Rome,
Meliboeus. I stupidly used to think
That it was just like this town of
ours here, where we shepherds
always
drive the tender young lambs of
our flocks.
Just as puppies are like dogs, and
kids are like mother goats,
so I used to compare the great
with the small.
But Rome indeed has lifted her
head as high among other cities,
as cypress trees do among the
weeping willows. (Virgil, Eclogue
1.20–8)*

That image of a solitary cypress tree rising high above the willows gets it right. Rome was unique.

Maybe there were another five or six cities in the ancient world the populations of which touched 100,000: Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus are good candidates. But imperial Rome

soared above them. Looking at the great port built by Trajan at the mouth of the Tiber and recently excavated by the University of Southampton and the British School at Rome we can see the huge burden of feeding this city. Grain was brought from France, Africa, Greece, even Egypt. Water was drawn down from the Apennine ridge. Herds of pigs and geese were driven to Rome along those famous roads. Quarries were opened up, timber floated down the Tiber and huge brick-yards were constructed upstream of Rome. Other cities had their aqueducts, transport links, and industrial hubs, of course. But the difference was of scale, not kind. The economy of all Italy became focused on supplying the metropolis.

The people of Rome

But what about the people of Rome? Who were they and where did they come from? This is more of a puzzle.

Most of what we know about how cities grow in size is based on the history of the last few hundred years. Many of the greatest cities of the nineteenth century grew when they became capitals of European nations and/or of world empires. London, Paris, and Berlin are all examples of cities that grew in periods of nation-building. Other cities expanded when in periods of economic growth: Liverpool, Chicago, Hong Kong are good examples. The City of Rome too grew in a period of imperial and economic expansion. Some historians think it doubled in size each generation beginning in the early second century B.C. when Rome came to dominate the Mediterranean. The idea is that the profits of empire – plunder, tribute, tax – came to be spent in the capital and populations moved there to enjoy them. The spectacular monuments that Strabo describes were all built in the period of Rome’s fastest expansion overseas, the conquests of Pompey in the East, of Caesar in Gaul, and of Augustus and his sons across all of Europe.

Yet we learn other things from modern cities too. One is that large cities were, until very recently, death traps. Dirt, disease, fire, poverty, unsafe housing, and a population packed together into too little

space all meant death-rates were far higher than birth-rates. This was true in Europe until the twentieth century and remains true in some of the world's biggest cities today. So for ancient Rome we have a new question. If more people died each year than were born, how was the population topped up?

Populating the city

For the Republican period there are theories. Many Romans themselves agreed with Tiberius Gracchus who was tribune of the people in 133 B.C. that many citizens had actually lost out from Rome's imperial expansion. While they were away fighting foreign wars, their lands were acquired or occupied by the rich who used slaves as labour. Dispossessed peasant-soldiers swelled the City when they returned from campaign, a potentially angry mob ready to lend their muscle to revolutionaries. Meanwhile citizens of Rome's Italian allies came to the City to get their share of the proceeds of empire. Perhaps, although things look a bit more complicated to most historians today. But even if Rome did expand as a side-effect of empire, how did the city remain so large after expansion stopped? It was not sucking the population out of other Italian cities: the first two centuries A.D. are a period of urban growth in Italy and most of the Mediterranean provinces. Nor was Rome a healthier place under the emperors.

The biggest cities of the modern world are powered by mass immigration or improvements in life expectancy. In the Global North, our biggest cities are also the most cosmopolitan, drawing immigrants from all over the world. Greater London has a population of around 9 million and over 300 languages are spoken here. By contrast, in Africa's mushrooming mega-cities, birth rates remain high, while death rates are falling; the result is population increase and urban growth. But ancient Rome cannot have fitted either pattern.

Urban growth and urban graveyards

To begin with, unsanitary conditions make it very unlikely that birth-rates were high: infant mortality from malaria and malnutrition was significant, at a rate of roughly 30 per every 100 according to the best estimate. Among the slave population, there was also an imbalance between the numbers of men and women – male slaves being more popular. What this means is that, although some slaves did have children, there were probably never enough home-grown slaves to fully replace their parents' generation. Studies of historical slave populations around the world suggest this is common enough: all

slave societies have depended on a slave trade to keep up numbers. Even the senatorial aristocracy needed to recruit new members from the equestrian order. Typically speaking, the bigger the city, the greater the imbalance between deaths and births. Demo-graphers even have a name for it, the 'urban graveyard effect'. Before modern medicine and sanitation changed the rules, all big cities have been importers of population, hence their cosmopolitan nature.

Yet imperial Rome was not able to attract skilled, freeborn migrants in sufficient numbers. Today's economic migrants often work in retail or hospitality, drive taxis, work in restaurants, take on low-paid jobs as cleaners or nurses. We have a global labour market made possible by modern communications. But in the ancient world many of these jobs were done by slaves, not free labourers. And when we look at the archaeology of Pompeii or Ostia we find no restaurants, few inns, and many of the shops and taverns (Romans called both *tabernae*) seem to have been owned by the wealthy and staffed by their clients, many of them former slaves.

New arrivals in imperial Rome might have found some casual work on building sites or on the docks, but probably only in the summer months. There was no large casual labour sector. Nor was it easy or cheap for economic migrants to make their way to Rome in the first place. The great migrations of the industrial age have been by rail or steamboat, and many migrants were indentured labour, their passage paid by eventual employers. Rome had no dedicated passenger vessels of any size, no system of enticing labourers to travel from the provinces, no mechanisms for would-be migrants to borrow the fare and pay it back later.

The conclusion?

'Once you eliminate the impossible' according to Sherlock Holmes 'whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.' Historians are coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that the population of imperial Rome was indeed sustained by immigration, but not by the kind of immigrants who were free entrepreneurs in search of fame and fortune. Rome's immigrants must have come mostly in chains, the luckiest sold to the houses of the rich from which a few would emerge decades later as freedmen and freedwomen, the rest put to work maintaining the eternal city. A few had families and children but most, when they died, would be replaced by new slaves freshly arrived in the market. It was these slaves, along with ex-slaves and their descendants, who formed the invisible crowds that Strabo and others looked past as they

admired the spectacular monuments of the imperial capital.

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